

EU may reconsider Irish border issue if UK gives ground on 'red lines'

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News

European Parliament President Antonio Tajani says the EU may be ready to re-think the Irish border issue if the UK "also changes its red lines."



Photo Credit: Press Association

The Italian MEP was speaking at a news conference in Parliament on Thursday minutes after "a long face-to-face" with UK Prime Minister Theresa May who was in Brussels for more talks on Brexit.

Tajani told reporters the EU side is "open to be more ambitious on future relations [with the UK]."

This, he said, includes "looking again at the Irish situation if the UK changes its red lines."

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The Irish border issue and the so-called backstop - a kind of insurance policy against the return of a hard border between the north and south of Ireland - is proving to be the biggest obstacle to reaching agreement on the UK's exit from the EU on 29 March.

'ECONOMIC AND HUMAN CATASTROPHE'

Tajani, an EPP member, spoke of the "economic and human catastrophe" of Brexit, saying "this is the reality of a no-deal Brexit."

"This [a no deal] is a very dangerous solution and is why Parliament fully supports the Withdrawal Agreement. This is the only solution that will grant an orderly exit, protect the peace agreement in Northern Ireland and safeguard the integrity of single market."

He said May, at the meeting, had been asked to give a commitment to the Good Friday peace agreement and Tajani said he had stressed the issue of citizens' rights, one of the EU's own red lines in the talks.

"We underlined the importance of a Brexit without a no deal but also said that it is impossible to change the content of the Withdrawal Agreement" **Antonio Tajani**

Tajani said, "This is very important both for EU citizens in the UK and also for British people in Europe."

On future relations with the UK, he said, "We want good cooperation with the UK on a range of issues, including defence, immigration and trade. This is our position after a long face-to-face with Mrs May."

"We underlined the importance of a Brexit without a no deal but also said that it is impossible to change the content of Withdrawal Agreement and the need to talk, talk, talk with the UK."

'EXIT TO THE BREXIT' IMPASSE

Alde leader Guy Verhofstadt, who leads Parliament's Brexit steering group, also attended the meeting with May and, speaking at the same briefing, said he had "assured" the Prime Minister that "there will be a backstop."

Verhofstadt said, "This is important and there is no question of it being removed. The backstop is absolutely necessary to safeguard the internal market and the Irish peace process."

“An all-weather backstop is the key. If there are problems with our proposals, we said that we will try to resolve these in the political declaration so that we can make it more binding and more precise, including on the issue of backstop. This [the backstop] is a kind of insurance, no more than that.”

Verhofstadt also bemoaned the current “uncertainties” in the UK surrounding Brexit, saying “We cannot have a deal with these uncertainties. Cross-party cooperation is the way forward and we welcome the letter sent to Mrs May today by Jeremy Corbyn [the UK Labour leader] and the offer for such cross-party cooperation.”

“A no-deal Brexit would be a disaster on both sides of the Channel and it is also irresponsible for some UK politicians to say that they prefer a no deal” **Guy Verhofstadt**

This, he said, is the best “exit to the Brexit” impasse.

He added, “It is important to have the broadest possible majority [for a deal] and I can say that a no deal for us is not an option.”

“A no-deal Brexit would be a disaster on both sides of the Channel and it is also irresponsible for some UK politicians to say that they prefer a no deal. This is the opinion we have stated today in the name of the European Parliament.”

HELL-ISH FURORE

Meanwhile, European Council President Donald Tusk has faced demands to apologise for his “hell” comments about Brexit.

Speaking on Wednesday, Tusk said, “I’ve been wondering what that special place in hell looks like, for those who promoted Brexit, without even a sketch of a plan how to carry it out safely.”

Some Brexit supporters have called for him to apologise while others say he has nothing to apologise for.

At the news conference, Tusk said, “There are 50 days left until the UK’s exit from the European Union, following the decision and the will of the UK authorities. I know that still a very great number of people in the UK, and on the continent, as well as in Ireland, wish for a reversal of this decision.”

“Today, there is no political force and no effective leadership for remain. I say this without satisfaction, but you can’t argue with the facts” **Donald Tusk**

“I have always been with you, with all my heart. But the facts are unmistakable. At the moment, the pro-Brexit stance of the UK Prime Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition, rules out this question. Today, there is no political force and no effective leadership for remain. I say this without satisfaction, but you can’t argue with the facts.”

“Today our most important task is to prevent a no-deal scenario. I would, once again, like to stress that the position of the EU27 is clear, as expressed in the documents agreed with the UK Government - that is the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration - and the EU27 is not making any new offer.”

“The top priority for us, remains the issue of the border on the island of Ireland, and the guarantee to

maintain the peace process in accordance with the Good Friday Agreement.”

“There is no room for speculation here. The EU itself is first and foremost a peace project. We will not gamble with peace; or put a sell-by date on reconciliation. And this is why we insist on the backstop,” Tusk added.

Elsewhere, Jeremy Corbyn has set out Labour's five Brexit demands in a letter to Theresa May following their meeting last week.

He says that while the Prime Minister is focused on negotiating changes to the backstop, she needs to enshrine five changes to the Political Declaration in law to secure Labour support for a sensible deal that can bring the country together.

About the author

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